

Eleven

Later that night Elena, Modra's mother, called. She had received Julie at the airport and couldn't believe how distraught her poor daughter was. And now, she was taking it upon herself to call and get to the bottom of what happened between the two of them.

Of course, Modra could already tell that her mother had drawn her conclusion from what Julie told her, which was that somehow Modra had everything to do with why Julie was still pining for a baby.

"I don't want to argue with you any more Modra. I just want to hear from you why you think your sister shouldn't have another baby."

There were so many things she wanted to say to her mother in self-defense, primarily that she wanted Julie to have another baby if it made her happy, but that she simply didn't want to be the one to give birth to it. But she refused to go down that rabbit hole with her once again. The call was not meant for the purpose of information gathering, it was made as a

pretext to apply pressure on Modra and make her bend. All of the things Modra wanted to say would only serve as drivers to prove to her mother how selfish she was. She bit her bottom lip and debated having the discussion before deciding it was pointless.

“You know mom, I’m sorry you wasted your time calling me because I’m not interested in having this conversation with you. I love you, but I wish you would just stay out of this.” And for the first time in her life, she hung up on her mother.

But alas, Elena’s phone call was only the beginning. About an hour passed before the phone rang again. It was Mikaela, the middle sister.

“Hey Mod. Wow, I can’t believe you hung up on mom. She’s so angry with you that she must have repeated your conversation like a hundred times then each time she would say ‘can you believe she hung up on her mother?’” Mikaela giggled. “You’re brave sister.”

There was a pause. Modra wasn’t sure what her sister was after so she didn’t speak.

“Anyway, she told me about Veloria and of course Julie and how emotional she is right now.” Still nothing from Modra so she continued, “well... I just wanted to call you and let you know that even though I

don't completely agree with you, that I have decided to stay neutral on this. But that I do think it's unfair of you to stand in her way when you already turned her down as a surrogate.”

Modra didn't know what to say. She looked at her phone and hit end without saying goodbye.

The phone rang again a few seconds after she hung up on Mikaela and she instinctively pressed end and sent the call to voice mail, she had been sure it was her sister calling again, but when she went to confirm the caller, she panicked. It was her father's cell number that showed up on her screen as a missed call.

She sat on the bed and stared at the phone before her, wondering what words of disappointment her father had left her. The cruel red light on her phone was flashing, reminding her that she had a voice mail from her father.

“Crap!” she whispered. Oddly, Modra had always accepted the disappointments she caused her mother as being part of the reason she was born, but disappointing her father had a different connotation, one of actual failure or misjudgment on her part.

Eventually, she worked up the courage and called her voicemail.

“Honey,” her father’s tone was kind, “I overheard your conversation with your mother earlier and I want you to know that I firmly stand behind your decision. Your mother is meddlesome and sometimes a bit on the crazy side. You should just ignore her. She and I will be having words about this. I love you... and I’m sorry for the hell your family is putting you through.”

A tear ran down her cheek as she forwarded the message to Kevin’s voice mail.

The last call of the evening was from Ricky, her older brother. That was the call that put the nail in the coffin. He too could not believe that Modra had the audacity to hang up on their mother. He explained that Mom had called him and filled him in on how disappointed she was with Modra, and then proceeded to recount the many other perceived disappointments she had caused their poor mother throughout the years. The biggest doozie was when the family found out that she and Kevin had moved in together before being properly married. In fact, both Ricky and her mother were beside themselves when Modra had admitted they had no plans for getting married in the near future. That was followed by Modra’s choice to have a non-denominational ceremony when she did finally choose

to “do the right thing”—five years later. He also criticized her for being the only one to move away from the family unit, and now, now she had apparently caused their mother the ultimate disappointment and heartache. He demanded to know how she could possibly have any self-respect as a woman.

“You know,” he said in a stern monotone, “I’m tired of explaining to my kids why Aunt Mod and Uncle Kevin don’t have children. The next time they ask me, I’m just going to tell them that you don’t like kids.” He cleared his throat, “That’s right. I heard about the great advice you gave poor impressionable Veloria.”

Modra was surprised. She hadn’t spoken to Veloria about the pregnancy much less given her any advice. She wanted to hang up on him as well, but he’d caught her interest.

“What advice?”

“Oh-come-one-Mod! I get that you don’t want certain things in your life, but why in the world would you stand in your sister’s way of having another baby. If Veloria wants her to adopt her baby, then you should stay the hell out of her way.”

Modra wanted to throw up. *That’s what this is all about.* Somehow, the family got the idea that she

was an obstacle between Julie and Veloria's baby, as if Veloria had already declared the baby for Julie and Modra had somehow objected and ruined her chance.

She hung up on her brother and turned off her ringer. The constant hammering on the same subject was driving her mad. Who should she be furious with, Julie or her mother? After giving the situation some thought, she knew the word twisting was most likely her mother's work, so it would be her mother she would hold in contempt.

She could already visualize the sensational story her mother had spun: Veloria arrived at Modra's house, desperate for help. She flung the big front door open and saw Julie standing there with empty arms and instantly knew that Julie would be the perfect mother for her baby. She proposed that Julie adopt her baby, but wasn't aware that Modra was listening in the kitchen. Modra came out and took a stand against Julie adopting Veloria's baby and demanded that Julie leave immediately, so the poor thing had to pay more to come home early when she was so close to adopting a baby. *My mother should have been a novella screen writer.*

By midnight, the day's events had again left Modra completely exhausted. She was emotionally

drained to the point where crawling back into bed and sleeping it all away felt like the only option. Kevin was equally angry and frustrated with Modra's family, with the exception of her father and younger brother, Jose, who hadn't called at all. It dawned on Modra that during the total chaos occurring around her and her own family, she hadn't called Christine all day.

"What a nightmare," Modra said as she got into bed that night.

Kevin, already in bed, nodded and sat up placing his book in his lap. "I have never, in all of the fifteen years of our marriage, ever seen this side of your family... at least not to this extreme." He rubbed his eyes, "I've always accepted they're a meddling ways because they tend to do it all out of love, but this is seriously ridiculous. Do you think they will ever let this go? What is it with them and having children, and why is what we do so important to them?" he said it without any attempt to disguise the frustration in his voice.

"I don't know to all of that." Modra responded, wondering the same thing.

"I'm thinking that maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to leave sooner than later... I'm thinking we

should just book our flights to Argentina and leave immediately.”

It sounded like a magnificent idea, but Modra needed to know everything with Veloria was settled before they left. She pulled the blanket up waist high and said with disappointment, “we can’t. I think we need to be around for both Bill and Christine during this whole Veloria process. But once we know they are all set and Veloria’s situation is handled, I’m all for going straight to the airport.” She gave him a huge smile, “we don’t even have to pack, we can just go.”

Kevin smiled and hugged her tightly. She was always on the same page with him and he loved that.

“Deal.” he agreed, knowing she was right and he really didn’t have a choice. “Who knows, with all this madness, Bill and Christine may be ready to come with us.”

“I wouldn’t mind, so long as we got as far away from my family as possible, as fast as possible.” She yawned and turned over to go to sleep. “Oh, to be far away and unavailable by phone would be a dream come true, at least until everything blows over and everyone settles down again.” she was oozing exhaustion with her last words.

Kevin reached over and pulled the blanket over her shoulders then went back to his book.

It was the middle of the night when Kevin's eyes popped open. He had fallen asleep reading his book. Modra must have placed it on the nightstand for him and covered him at some point during the night. He looked around and noticed that his wife was already out of bed. The alarm clock next to his book said it was four in the morning. Worried and curious, he got out of bed and grabbed his robe, sliding into his slippers without pausing. Before heading downstairs to scout for his wife, he poked his head into the bathroom—not a light was on. The second he opened their bedroom door, the scent of fresh coffee wafted into his nostrils. He stumbled his way in down the stairs in complete darkness until he stood in the empty kitchen scanning the room for his wife's trail. A red glow caught his attention. He looked out the window to the source of the glow and spotted Modra's head rocking back and forth right next to the glaring outside heater. This time he made sure to take an empty coffee mug with him before joining her on the porch.

“Good morning,” he said holding back his smile, not quite sure if it was appropriate. But why not

smile, he thought, it was a new day and *all* of Modra's family was at least 900 miles away.

“Good morning babe.” She looked over at him noticing his empty coffee mug. She smiled and instantly held up the full coffee thermos for him to take.

Kevin took it and put it on the small square table between them. He was observing her, not quite sure how he should proceed. Was she fragile? Why in the world was she out there again in the wee hours of the night?

“Do you mind if I move the heater back, just behind us a little?” he asked already pushing on it. “I want to be able to see who I'm talking to.”

She shook her head. When he finally sat in his chair, he filled his mug and held it in both hands for warmth. He began rocking back and forth, taking in the peaceful darkness that surrounded them without the recent heavy fog.

“Couldn't sleep again?” he asked, reaching across to take her hand.

She smiled at him and turned her hand over and locked her fingers into his. “Nope...you know... I just hadn't had enough time to process the whole Julie thing, not to mention the whole Veloria thing.”

“Oh, I do know.” He too hadn’t had much time to do anything except field his wife’s family phone calls. If Julie hadn’t been visiting, they would have sat last night and talked about the situation and allowed each other to openly discuss their opinion on it all without judgment. Instead, everything became convoluted and tangled so that by the end of the night it was all about them and Julie instead of Veloria. “So, how long have you been out here?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I think it’s been about an hour.” She swigged her coffee to refill her mug with hot. “It was so weird. I was so tired last night that I just pooped out, then I woke up at about two o’clock and couldn’t for the life of me go back to sleep. So I decided to give up and just come downstairs.” She looked at Kevin. “This has just become the best place for me to think.”

Kevin felt exactly the same way about the porch. In his opinion, early mornings on the porch were worth more and had better results than private counseling ever could.

“I really like it, it’s so peaceful.”

“It is. And this time of the morning is the best for thinking. You don’t have to feel guilty for sitting around and doing nothing because everyone else is still

asleep.” He squeezed her hand, “Yup. This is definitely the place to be when you’re trying to wrap your mind around something, or when you just want to relax your soul.”

“I finally get why you like to get up so early and sit out here.” She sat, pensive, for a minute then said, “Honestly, I’m just struck by the fact that a decision we made ten years ago has so perfectly coincided with both Julie and Veloria’s peculiar situations. It seems so cruel that it’s worked out this way.”

“It really does.”

“This whole mess has given me a new perspective. I mean, I still believe strongly that Veloria shouldn’t have this baby, but I am definitely beginning to understand why people have such strong opinions on the subject. I mean, look at us.”

Kevin turned to face his wife. “What about us?”

“Well, it’s just that I just couldn’t sit quiet about Veloria. I totally meddled and told Christine, Christine who has been completely supportive with us. I told her exactly how I felt about Veloria being a mom. I let her know that I thought it was a bad idea.”

“Well, you’re just being a good friend... and aunt, if you ask me.”

“Call it whatever, but I was hypocrite and, the only reason you agree with me because we share the same values, which is why we’re still married.” She smiled, but he missed her joke.

“Yeah, but sometimes you have to be a hypocrite. Sometimes you just need to say it because people are blind to everything except what we believe in.” He ran his hand over the stubble on his chin. “Honestly sweetie, I know you, and I can’t imagine that you would have rather said nothing. This way, at least you know you tried... for Veloria’s sake.”

Kevin was right and she knew it. “Thanks,” she whispered before closing her eyes and sitting back to do the rest of her thinking in silence. The morning passed and the two sat in their rockers, enjoying each other’s company and each other’s silence. At seven o’clock, Modra’s cell phone rang; she decided to let it go to voice mail. After last night’s barrage of phone calls, she had decided she would screen her calls from her family before answering. Shortly after, she went to the kitchen to get more coffee and listen to the voice mail. It was from Christine, who’d called to invite her over for an early lunch. She would be expected at eleven o’clock, and as an afterthought, Christine asked if she could bring the vodka. Modra smiled at her

friend's voicemail and placed the vodka bottle on the counter so she wouldn't forget it before rejoining Kevin on the porch.

Later that morning, she left her landscaping duties and husband at home before running down the street to Bill and Christine's home for her early lunch appointment. She stood before the big, dark oak door and looked around to take notice of all the beautiful spring colors popping out from within pockets of lush green bushes and ferns. She realized she hadn't noticed the emergence of spring that year; her mind had been so preoccupied with so much she literally hadn't stopped to smell the roses.

She was sure that that was the first time she had taken notice of the breathtaking colors and flowers: there were Japanese maple crimson leaves swaying with the breeze; the bougainvillea bent backward as it leaned against the stone wall, displaying a blanket of pink flowers; and the wisteria that drooped its large, clustered, purple blooms in full view for the hummingbirds to enjoy. She loved the way nature provided serenity for anyone who'd pause long enough to take notice. A cool breeze touched her and made her shiver as she rang the doorbell.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming,” Christine said as she opened the door and moved aside for Modra to enter. “Of course, I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to avoid this minefield.”

Modra looked at the striking woman who stood before her. She wore a mauve summer dress and tan, sling-back, heels. Her hair was perfect and her makeup impeccable. Christine looked as beautiful as the flowers outside her front door. Wow, Modra thought, then smiled and gave her best friend a big hug. “You look meticulously stunning.” She couldn’t believe that she would look that perfect if it were her in the same situation.

“Thank you.” Christine replied as if it were a mandatory edict.

Modra brushed it off and said, “I’m sorry for being late. Kevin and I were napping in the living room when we realized it was already ten-thirty. He probably missed his tee time and, of course, I was late coming here.”

Damn it, Modra thought, how insensitive! Why in the hell did she mention that Kevin was playing golf today? She stood there like a deer caught in headlights, wanting to apologize but afraid to make it worse.

“Don’t worry. It’s my life that’s falling apart, not yours.” Christine smiled. “I expect you to continue to live without a worry and tell me all about it. I mean it,” she insisted. She looked right into Modra’s eyes to drive her point home and didn’t look away until Modra agreed with a nod. She led Modra to the kitchen.

As they left the foyer, Christine couldn’t rid herself of the cluttered and burdensome feeling that stuck to her. Modra complimented her on the gorgeous landscaping as they walked past the family room but Christine could only hear the echo of their footsteps on the pristine white tile floor: clomp, clomp, clomp, clomp; it wasn’t just the sound of the shoes making contact with the tile, but the echo that caused her anxiety to build with every step. She needed a distraction. Every sound seemed louder than ever, putting her on edge and forcing her to question her sanity. Her only relief was that Modra had accepted her invitation for lunch. She hoped it would keep her mind distracted for at least a couple of hours.

“What a mess, Mod,” Christine said, looking at her beat-up nails and cuticles.

Modra could see she had been biting them. She was about to speak but her thoughts left her when she looked around the kitchen. She literally had to stop

right where she was to absorb it all. The amount of food that Christine had put out was out of proportion for the number of expected guests, which was just her. For the cocktails, there were: pimento stuffed olives, long thin pickled asparagus, and pearl onions strung together on toothpicks, all delicately arranged in cut-glass dishes. A tall, narrow and beautiful cut-glass pitcher of tomato juice sat next to an ornate crystal decanter that Modra guessed was for the vodka. Other items had been added to the table: a silver pie plate with a beautiful quiche and a couple of pewter plates with snacks that needed closer inspection. Modra quietly took in the spread then turned to look at Christine with a look that asked: *you do realize there are only two of us.*

“I know,” Christine said, suddenly embarrassed, aware that the amount of food on the table was beyond ridiculous. “I needed something to do. I didn’t want to think anymore and I’m tired of crying, so I made frittata, muffins, and empanadas.” She stopped trying to explain and exhaled. “Let’s sit, eat, drink, and talk.” Needing no response, she promptly took the vodka bottle from Modra’s hands and poured it into the decanter.

“Hey, if baking and cleaning help you cope, then bake and clean away,” Modra said, taking the vodka decanter from her friend’s shaky hand. “I’ll get this. Please sit and try to relax. You’ve obviously been on your feet for hours.” She looked at the cut-glass pitcher before putting it down, surprised at how heavy it was.

A huge laugh suddenly shot out of Christine, startling both of them and causing Modra, who was pouring tomato juice into their glasses, to plunge the heavy pitcher onto the table, forcing the thick red liquid to fly out of the pitcher and onto the hand-crocheted tablecloth. Modra looked at the mess then looked at Christine panic-stricken. She had most likely just ruined Christine’s Italian hand crocheted table cloth.

Knowing the tomato juice would stain and not caring, Christine saw the worry on Modra’s face and laughed again. Completely confused, Modra joined Christine and both laughed until tears were streaming down their cheeks; and then just like that they stopped laughing. They kept eye contact. Neither would dare speak, they were afraid to ruin the moment. Their eyes locked on one another, they smiled, and without a

word apologized and acknowledged how screwed up everything was right then.

Modra wiped the tears from her face and set a Bloody Mary before Christine, along with a piece of frittata.

“Finally!” Christine said taking a grateful sip. “I thought you were never going to finish making it.”

Modra gave her a sideways glance then proceeded to select a beef empanada to go with her Bloody Mary.

They both sat picking at their food. Christine whirled the pickled asparagus around and around watching the celery salt sink and disappear into her drink and Modra dissected the empanada and inspected the filling as though she’d never had one before.

“Christine, it will work itself out,” Modra said, still playing with her food. “Whatever you all decide to do with that baby, life will come together around that decision. Just give yourselves time for the readjusting that needs to take place.”

“I know what you’re saying, and I’ve been trying to remind myself of that,” Christine said, taking another sip. “But right now it just sounds easier than it is.”

Modra put her fork down and pushed her empanada aside. Her thoughts were on Christine's impossible situation. It didn't matter how this went down, there would be residual effects for Veloria and that's where the heartache was.

"The thing is that like everything else, it does eventually pass," Modra said, reassuringly as she thought back to Julie's teenage pregnancy. Keeping the baby was never a question for Julie or their parents, though like Christine, they were very disappointed and heartbroken at the news of her pregnancy. But as time passed and Julie's belly grew so did the love and excitement for the baby to come. Everyone, except for Modra, had forgotten about their disappointment and heartache. As her due date had approached, her parents had forgotten that Julie was too young to have a baby. In fact, it seemed that Julie no longer even remembered that she'd given up a full scholarship at Washington State University to have Daniel. If she did recall that fact, she would probably never admit it.

"I'm sure it does and I'm sure it will, but right now it just feels like the rug has been pulled from under us." Christine sighed, disillusioned. "One stupid mistake is going to change this family forever, not to mention Veloria's future." She began to cry. "You

should know she's going to have the baby and give it up for adoption."

"Oh." Modra reached for her drink and took a swig. She hesitated only for a second before taking her Bloody Mary and adding a vodka topper. "I think that's a great decision," she said out loud, but believing quite the opposite. Modra couldn't imagine Veloria, with her big heart and easy attachment to people, ever being able to give up the baby once it was born. Modra wasn't so sure that Veloria had the emotional strength to follow through with it.

"I want to be strong and resolute and I want to be confident that we will pick up the pieces where we left off, but I don't have the strength to lie to myself. It's going to be hard going for a little while and it's going to take every bit of my energy to smile and not show Veloria how disappointed I am in her every minute of every day." Christine spoke to Modra but looked into the space between the table and herself.

Modra nodded slowly to say she understood, though she couldn't. She couldn't understand how giving up your baby for adoption was easier than having an abortion. It made absolutely no sense for anyone to have such an emotional experience like

giving birth and then to say: Okay, here you go, bah-bye.

“Good. I’m glad it’s been decided,” Modra forced herself to smile, hoping she was successfully masking her disapproval. There were still a ton of questions she wanted to ask but decided to wait for a later time. She applauded their decision to keep the baby, or at least not to abort it, like a true double-talking politician who never says what she means. They both knew Modra didn’t agree with adoption, but Christine didn’t want to hear her opinion, and Modra didn’t want to share it . . . again.

Both Modra and Christine tried to lighten up the conversation by changing the subject. Modra discussed their plans to leave the country for six months now that the vasectomy had taken place. She was more than happy to share that the choice destination was Argentina. No, she explained, they’d never been there before and no, she didn’t know why they had never traveled south beyond Brazil. Christine asked Modra a million questions about their trip, evidently enjoying a topic of conversation that was something other than Veloria’s unfortunate pregnancy.

But before long, the subject drifted again to a general baby topic, except this time it was about Julie

and her search for a baby. Christine lamented the irony Veloria, Julie, and Modra's situations coinciding, and she assured Modra that she completely supported her response to Julie's request, admitting that she too could never give birth to a baby only to give it away. Neither of the two said it out loud but it was obvious by the sudden silence that they both wondered if Veloria was capable of such a thing.

"Bill and I think this situation with Julie is sort of a blessing for us. We're hoping we can make some arrangement between Julie and Veloria." Christine said peevishly, but sounding very hopeful.

Modra froze, only her head went sideways. She was going to protest, but why? Then she thought: Julie is desperate, Veloria is desperate, and the baby will need a home . . . why not?!

Christine watched Modra's face soften as she thought about the proposal in more detail.

"You know, I think it would be wonderful, but please run it by Veloria and tell me what she says before I get excited for Julie," Modra said, beginning to feel elated about the possibility of this working out better than expected. Veloria would only have to miss the fall semester due to her pregnancy before she could go to school, that wouldn't be too tragic. Then as an

afterthought she asked, “What about Diego, has he given his opinion?” Curiously, it dawned on Modra that they hadn’t discussed the young man once, almost as though he didn’t exist.

Christine looked away with pursed lips and shrugged. It was unmistakable that she really didn’t care one iota what his opinion was or wasn’t.

But of course Modra persisted. “What has he said about the baby? Have you spoken to him or his mother?”

Christine rolled her eyes.

Modra’s spirit dropped as she realized no arrangement between Julie and Veloria could be made unless Diego, the baby’s father, consented. Modra’s guess was that Diego probably wanted to keep the baby, which certainly would not work for Modra. Though what worked for Modra didn’t really count right now, and she needed to remind herself of that constantly. Sure, he would want to keep it, why wouldn’t he? He’s twenty-two, he’s already earned his bachelor’s degree in business, and he owns his own very successful and high-end restaurant with his mother. He probably feels that he’s ready to be a husband and a father.

“He wants to keep it, doesn’t he?” Modra asked, not disguising her disappointment from the simple fact that Veloria didn’t have the same luxuries as Diego. He’d already had the opportunity to earn his bachelor degree, she hadn’t. All the reasons Diego should keep this baby were the exact same reasons Modra thought Veloria shouldn’t, which she quickly reminded herself not to share.

“Ha!” Christine laughed. “That would be too responsible.” She dunked her finger into her Bloody Mary then placed it in her mouth before dismissing him as immature with a slap down gesture of her hand.

“Well, Christine,” Modra said, scowling at her friend, “what does he want?”

Christine rolled her eyes again. “Oh Modra, stop furrowing your forehead, you’re going to get wrinkles,” She said dismissively and furrowed her own brow.

Modra gave Christine a sideways smile and shook her head. She was wondering what in the hell Christine was thinking. “His opinion counts, Christine, and you have to consider it. Please tell me you’re not already becoming one of those meddling mother-in-laws who blame everything on the son-in-law.” Modra gave Christine a challenging look.

Well . . . yes, in fact, she had become one of those intrusive, demanding *and* demeaning mother-in-laws, but she wouldn't own up to it out loud. She decided she had a right to be. "First of all, he's not my son-in-law. Secondly, he doesn't want Veloria to keep the baby; he wants her to abort it. And lastly, he's an insignificant kid parading himself around as a responsible and *considerate* boyfriend by pretending to be concerned with Veloria getting her education rather than having a baby . . . THAT HE GAVE HER." Christine sat back and brushed her hair back into her bun with her palm. "I know it's his baby too, but he's not allowed to say that." Christine realized she sounded like a total nut case. "But you wouldn't understand..."

"Because I don't have children." Modra finished for her. "You're right, I don't have children," she added, treading carefully. She didn't have to remind herself that Christine was going through a very difficult time, but she did have to consider how much slack to give her best friend, who should know better than to marginalize her with that ridiculous comment.

"I'm sorry, that was unfair," Christine said, unfastening both window latches and looking out into the forest-like view that went way down into the creek.

She looked at the oaks and manzanita trees crowded together on their one-quarter-acre lot. Her eyes scoured the dense tree canopy beneath for her neighbor's home; she gained some satisfaction from the fact that it was completely obstructed from her view. She stood in the breakfast nook and enjoyed the feeling of remoteness for a brief second.

“You know, I've had my coffee in this room every morning for the past nineteen years.” She turned to look at Modra. “I usually start the coffee pot about when Bill walks out the front door for work and it's usually ready by the time Veloria heads off to school. But the last couple of days, I've had to skip my coffee routine altogether. Every time I sit in this room and try to relax, I can't. I keep going back to our conversation from the other night about abortion. Each and every time that I begin to consider the thought of my daughter having an abortion, my heart beats faster and faster, and with that the anxiety and depression that I got under control a long ago comes back. I've run through our conversation many times now and every time I hate myself. I hate myself because I agree with you and Bill. An abortion would be the best option for Veloria, and what I meant to say earlier was that you wouldn't understand, because unlike me, you have

never had one.” The anxiety had crept up on Christine. It was holding her tight now. She spoke faster to get her thoughts out before she lost her nerve, desperately looking across the table and around the room for her drink.

Modra stood with her back to the same window as Christine, only she was facing the table.

“Oh, God, Christine, I’m sorry. I never knew.”

“I know,” Christine said placing her hand on her friend’s shoulder, “I didn’t want you to ever know.”

“What a fucked up mess and what fucked up timing for all of this to happen.” She couldn’t believe how convoluted and intertwined things were becoming by the day—it was overwhelming. “I’ll take your empty glass and freshen it up.” That was the perfect excuse to do something and stop feeling so useless. Modra quickly scooped up Christine’s empty glass from its place on the chair next to where Christine had been sitting. She shook it in the air for Christine to see and saw a sign of relief in her friend’s face.

“Please! Light on the tomato juice, please.” She blushed then pushed her embarrassment away. She was sure Modra knew her well enough to know that she didn’t depend on liquor to cope or get by, that this was

an exception, and that if she decided to get plastered beyond coherence, she would be justified.

Standing on the other side of the kitchen island, Modra poured her Bloody Mary drink down the drain and found two new glasses. “When did you have the abortion?” She reached into the bottom drawer icebox of the sub-zero refrigerator with her left hand and held two crystal tumblers in her right.

Christine inhaled. She had clammy palms and a heart that was pounding against her chest. She wanted to share her story, but first she had to swallow down the knot in her throat. She didn’t feel sadness anymore, now it was just the anxiety that had compounded within her body from the old skeleton bones that had been dug up. Bang, bang, bang, she felt her heart and for a second she worried about having a heart attack, but the familiar banging against her chest continued. She reminded herself that it was only one of her recent all-too-common panic attack.

As always, Christine’s composure gave nothing away, but this time, she didn’t want to hide anything. This time she wanted to tell her best friend how it was that she gave in to pressure. This time she would confess, for the first time ever, to another person. She gladly opened Pandora’s Box and exposed her misery,

a misery that lived inside her and reminded her every time she saw a newborn baby's eyes. It had never before been discussed out loud once, not even with Bill, who seemed to have moved on and had never looked back. And now the thought of purging her conscience of her dirty little secret and letting someone, whom she trusted, judge her was alleviating and soothing to her soul.

She heard the clink of ice hitting glass as she watched Modra pour a jigger of vodka into each glass. Then, as Modra held out the pitcher of tomato juice and poured, Christine exclaimed, "I'm going to need more than one jigger, please."

Modra had already poured one glass to the top with the tomato juice and was ready to pour the second when she paused, looked at Christine and said, "Okay." Her solution was to pour the second jigger as a floater on top. Then she quickly left the kitchen with both drinks in hand before Christine had time to ask for more.

There was great relief in Christine's face when she received her cocktail. "Thanks," she said before drinking almost half of it in one gulp.

Modra smiled.

“Now,” Christine said calmly as though her heart wasn’t about to burst out of her chest and onto the perfectly white tiled floor that she had so diligently cleaned earlier that morning, “you asked me when I had the abortion.”